**THE AUSTERITY KITCHEN**
by CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER

Where the alimentary is elementary.

# Noshing with Nomads

by CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER

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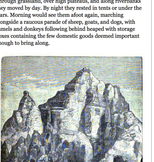
*Wandering peoples knew no distinction between home-cooked dinners and meals "on the go"*

Illustrations from M. Jullien's *Simal et Syria: souvenirs bibliques et christiens* (1893)

I'm moving again. This move will be my fourth in eight years and, like the three before it, owes not to any restless impulse but to banal necessity. Contrary economic winds have blown me from Arizona to New England, from New England back to Arizona, and from Arizona to western Pennsylvania. Now I'm returning to New England. Relocation ranks just below divorce and illness in terms of unusually stressful events. I feel this fact palpably.

Relieving my stress a bit is the fact that I'm headed for a bookier part of New England than the place of my previous stint. Adding to my stress is the fact that I soon must do the one thing dreaded by every itinerant book lover: paring down her library to a portable size. It's a sad task, deciding which books get dropped in moving boxes and which get dropped drop down the donation chute. In truth I haven't the heart for it. I'll end up keeping most of them, even though it will mean lugging some sixty cartons of them through high summer's swelter.



"I am much inclined to live from my rucksack, and let my trousers fray as they like." -Herman Hesse

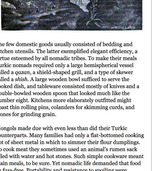
I tried in the past to break myself of this packrat-ish impulse, lest it end up breaking my back. I used an e-reader for a time. It crashed, and some 300 books vanished into the ether. (The event served to remind me that technological innovation is a notion quite distinct from technological progress.) In seven dark, its keys mashed, it presently lies crushed beneath four volumes of the Durants' *The Story of Civilization*. (These, incidentally, are coming with.)

"Do not free a camel of the burden of his hump; you may be freeing him from being a camel." -G.K. Chesterton

Yes, a rootless life is a ruthless life if it is encumbered by books or other possessions. Keeping their poems and stories safe in their brains as they drove their flocks to pasturage and water, nomads of yore traveled only with what they needed. Through grassland, over high plateaus, and along riverbanks they moved by day. By night they rested in tents or under the stars. Morning would see them afoot again, marching alongside a raucous parade of sheep, goats, and dogs, with camels and donkeys following behind heaped with storage boxes containing the few domestic goods deemed important enough to bring along.

"Wherever the migrant bows behind a willow that has become amorphous or beatific, the nomad is one who does not depart, does not want to depart, who clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest, where the steppe or the desert extends, who invents nomadism as a response to this challenge." -Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987)

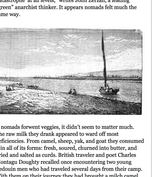
The Persians called the spare black tents in which the nomads of Afghanistan lived "feather butterflies."



"Some people treat themselves worse than they would their dogs, just for the sake of money. They spend four-fifths of their lives in this way without seeming to see or feel the vanities of life, and, then, if they are successful in a material sense, they use the fruits of this self-imposed and unnecessary servitude in the attempt to make the rest of their lives happy by indulgence, extravagance, luxury, and fad, because their natures have become so sour, or their tastes so perverted or dead, through lack of proper nourishment or cultivation, that there is nothing left for the comfort and ease, which they finally imagined their money could buy at this time to work upon." -Charles Summers, *The Nomadic: A Sentimentalist Novel* (1903)

The few domestic goods usually consisted of bedding and kitchen utensils. The latter exemplified elegant efficiency, a virtue esteemed by all nomadic tribes. To make their meals Turkic nomads required only a large hemispherical vessel called a quazu, a shield-shaped grill, and a type of skewer called a shish. A large wooden bowl sufficed to serve the cooked dish, and tableware consisted mostly of horn and a double-bowled wooden spoon that looked much like the number eight. Kitchens more elaborately outfitted night boast this rolling pins, colanders for skimming curds, and stones for grinding grain.

Mongols made due with even less than did their Turkic counterparts. Many families had only a flat-bottomed cooking pot of sheet metal in which to simmer their flour dumplings. To cook meat they sometimes used an animal's rumen sack filled with water and hot stones. Such simple cookware meant plain meals, to be sure. Yet nomadic life demanded that food be fuss-free. Portability and resistance to spoiling were virtues cherished above all others. Dried grain fit the bill, as did cured meat and sausage. Almost all nomadic tribes had a recipe for the latter. Afghan nomads' sausage often consisted solely of meat and freshly milled grain; Kazakh nomads made their sausage of horse meat and smoked it over a mix of elm, juniper, spruce, and meadowsweet. When they had mutton, they stuffed it in the sheep's own innards and roasted it over coals. And when sausages proved impossible, they covered hunks of brined meat with oil, garlic, and cheesecloth and dried them over a fire.



"We can either passively continue on the road to utter desensitization and destruction or turn in the direction of joyful upheaval, celebrating the indomitable spirit of willfulness and life that aims at dancing on the ruins of clocks, computers and that failure of imagination and will called work." -John Zerzan, *The Nihilist's Dictionary* (1994)

To modern readers nomad cuisine no doubt brings to mind the old Fats Waller song, "All That Meat and No Potatoes." And it was true that wandering peoples weren't ones to eat their vegetables. Meat avoided any kind of farming. Wild herbs, onions, and garlic sometimes found their way in the mutton confits and dishes of lamb wrapped in plucked skin. Yet such additions were not relished as much as you might imagine. When the young Genghis Khan and his family were robbed of their flock and sent into the wild to shift for themselves, they subsisted on forage of the steppes — berries, wild apricots, Russian olives, edible roots and greens. To the great conqueror these seemingly tasty foods were anything but. A true Mongol, he believed, are lots of horse meat and little besides. "Agriculture has been and remains a 'catastrophe' at all levels," writes John Zerzan, a leading "green" anarchist thinker. It appears nomads felt much the same way.

If nomads ferreted veggies, it didn't seem to matter much. The raw milk they drank appeared to ward off most deficiencies. From camel, sheep, yak, and goat they consumed it in all of its forms: fresh, soured, churned into butter, and dried and salted as curds. British traveler and poet Charles Montagu Doughty recalled once encountering two young Bedouin men who had traveled several miles from their camp. With them on their journey they had brought a milch camel and a single bowl. Such provisioning served to sustain nomadic travelers — but only just. On several occasions, Doughty encountered men who complained of "creeping hunger" and begged biscuits of him, despite having as much milk as they could drink.

Much of what we know about 19th-century Bedouin life comes from Doughty. He traveled widely from 1876 to 1878 in the vast desert of Arabia Deserta, a sparsely populated region of Saudi Arabia. He collected his observations in his 1888 book, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, which T.E. Lawrence had reprinted in the 1920s.

Doughty recorded how the Bedouin felt about the relative merits of their three main dairy sources: "Camel milk is the best of all nourishment; it is nearer to that of the bedden, the young camel with her first calf, as lightly purgative. Ewe's milk is very sweet and fattest of all, it is unwholesome to drink whole, it kills people with colic ... ewe buttermilk should be let sour some while in the sensly (buttermilk) with other milk, until all are tempered together, and then it is fit to drink. Goat milk is sweet, it leaves more than strengthens the body."

Everyday fare was more austere yet. For the Bedouin it typically came in the form of a single meal of bread and milk taken after the evening milking. This is not to suggest, however, that these wanderers were ascetics. Even an environment as rugged as theirs rendered up delicacies. Expert foragers and hunters, they ate a truffle-like desert plant called *terfenoue* and various small game — Cape hare, Ethiopian hedgehogs, porcupines, and rodents. These last creatures they threw on the fire, for and all. From their livestock's milk they made a clarified butter called *samn*, which they churned in an inflated animal skin and seasoned with coriander and cumin. They loved the stuff so much that they drizzled it on whatever food they could and even drank it straight, snuffing some up their noses for good measure.

"A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou." -Omar Khayyam

"O thou, who departest from me, mounted upon the clear-coloured camel, bearing upon its back the fourfolded saddle, / And its bag and neck-leather, and well-ground flour, with the coffee-beans, and the sweet-smelling Yemlan." -Bedouin poem

What the immediate environs failed to provide could be had by trade. Along with hijabes, tea, and salt, mulberries were a favorite, as were caravan dates. The latter could be found at all oases. Easy and economical to transport, cheap, and nutritious, they were said to taste like dry cotton wool and ashes, albeit not unpleasantly so. Supreme among all delicacies, however, was coffee. "Where there is not coffee, there is not merry company," went an old Bedouin saying. At the coffee tent men gathered to exchange news and tell stories. Doughty recounts an occasion when no less an eminence than "a ruler of seven tribes" carried out the coffee ceremony, roasting, pounding, boiling, and serving "the cheerful mixture with his own hand."

"These characteristics of the land, exacting on the inhabitants, render them in great part of unsettled disposition, of independent individualism, jealous of the secrets of water and pasture which barely make life possible, and proud of an exclusive liberty, which has never been long infringed." -David George Hogarth, *The Penetration of Arabia* (1904)

A century ago nomadic Bedouin made up some 10% of the total Arab population. Today they account for 1%.

Nomads elsewhere didn't fare well either. The Soviets settled Kyrgyz nomads in agricultural villages. Endangered Bactrian, meanwhile, destroyed the ability of Afghan nomads to continue their way of life.

A century later, fascination with this nation of brothers hadn't waned. "Homeless, cut off from the world," writes Albert Camus in his 1937 story "The Adulterous Woman,"

> they were a handful wandering over the vast territory ... which however was but a paltry part of an even greater expanse whose dizzying course stopped only thousands of miles farther south, where the first river finally waters the forest. Since the beginning of time, on the dry earth of this limitless land scraped to the bone, a few men had been ceaselessly trudging, possessing nothing but serving no one, poverty-stricken but free lords of a strange kingdom.

By the time Camus's adulterous woman was fantasizing about joining in ceaseless trudging, nomads had arrived at something of a standstill. The combustion engine came to replace camel and donkey as the nomads' beast of burden, destroying their wealth as it did so. Politics joined technology in the fateful pincers. Government policies in Egypt and Israel, along with oil production in Libya and the Persian Gulf, forced many Bedouin into sedentary life and wage labor. Even in Doughty's time, oases were devolving from cheerful kaffeklatsches to fiefdoms where men spared over politics and taxes.

Whatever its difficulties, the natural simplicity of the life nomadic maintains a certain allure. Unfortunately, more than a few of us these days are getting a taste of a more modern and decidedly unromantic version of it, one which leaves us possessing nothing, yet serving someone.

Recipe for "Stuffed Eggs for Travelling" from Bates *Home Recipes* (1891): "Boil eggs hard, remove the shell, cut lengthwise and remove yolks; chop yolks very fine, adding a very little onion, mix with a little oil, vinegar, cayenne pepper, salt and black pepper, place into the whites; put the eggs together as though whole, wrap in tissue paper twisted at the ends."

*Previously by*
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